

Starmer's defence review prepares UK for nuclear war with Russia

Robert Stevens
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The Starmer Labour government published its strategic defence review (SDR) Monday, with its central aim to prepare Britain to fight wars against Russia in Europe and the Atlantic. The SDR makes clear that this is conceived of as a nuclear conflict.

The SDR categorises Russia an “immediate and pressing” threat operating a “war economy” that “if sustained, will enable it to rebuild its land capabilities more quickly” after any ceasefire in Ukraine. China is labelled a “sophisticated and persistent challenge”, expected to have 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030.

Speaking at a BAE shipyard in Govan, Glasgow, Starmer—with two newly commissioned Royal Navy Type 26 frigates being constructed behind him—said the UK “cannot ignore the threat Russia poses”.

He declared, “we are moving to warfighting readiness as the central purpose of our armed forces. When we are being directly threatened by states with advanced military forces, the most effective way to deter them is to be ready. And, frankly, to show them that we’re ready.”

The review was commissioned by Starmer and Defence Secretary John Healey on Labour coming to office almost a year ago. It was led by former NATO secretary-general Lord George Robertson—a former Labour defence minister—with backing from retired British Army officer General Sir Richard Barrons; and Anglo-American academic, foreign affairs advisor and author Dr. Fiona Hill.

Starmer announced that under the Aukus alliance with the US and Australia, up to 12 nuclear powered attack submarines would be built aimed at “protecting Britain’s waters” with a schedule “to deliver a new sub every 18 months” from the Barrow shipyard.

As “part of the historic renewal of our nuclear deterrent”, £15 billion would be invested “in our sovereign warhead programme”.

With Britain a main supplier to Ukraine in the NATO

led war against Russia, Starmer announced the procurement of up to 7,000 UK-built long-range weapons, along with spending £1.5 billion “to build at least six munitions and energetics factories.”

This, Healey pledges, would make the British Army “10x more lethal”. It requires the militarisation of society, with Starmer saying in Glasgow that Labour’s review would enable “A battle-ready, armour-clad nation,” in which “Every part of society, every citizen of this country has a role to play.” The population had to “recognise that things have changed. In the world of today the front line, if you like, is here... We face war in Europe, new nuclear risks, daily cyber attacks,” with “growing Russian aggression in our waters, menacing our skies”.

Starmer and Healey were hit with a further round of criticism from sections of the media and senior military figures for once again not setting a date when it would spend 3 percent of GDP on military spending, from its current 2.3 percent and for not pledging an increased membership of the UK’s armed forces.

Starmer has committed only to reaching 2.5 percent by 2027-28 with an “ambition” of meeting 3 percent by the end of the next parliament as “fiscal conditions allow.” The *Daily Mail* denounced “Labour’s defence spending retreat”. The *Telegraph* wrote of “Labour’s defence strategy in disarray” after Healey said over the weekend that meeting 3 percent of GDP by 2034 was only an “ambition”.

Speaking to *Times Radio*, former head of the British Army Lord Dannatt declared the strategic defence review did not “cut the mustard... It’s like saying to Adolf Hitler in 1938 please don’t attack us till 1946 because we’re not going to be ready.”

Russia’s armed forces consist of around one million active-duty personnel and close to two million reservists. Britain’s army, due to several decades of cuts following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, is down to

71,000 troops. Healey's plan, as announced in Parliament later Monday, only envisages an increase to "at least 76,000 full-time soldiers in the next Parliament."

Given the vast difference in strength between Russia's armed forces and the UKs, the SDR focuses massively on developing British imperialism nuclear arsenal. Moreover, even though Starmer boasts of his partners in a European "coalition of the willing" intensifying support for Ukraine against Russia, this programme relies on the United States for its realisation.

The *Sunday Times* trailed the SDR by revealing in its main article, "Britain wants to purchase fighter jets capable of firing tactical nuclear weapons, in a major expansion of the deterrent intended to counter the growing threat posed by Russia."

For decades the UK has only been capable of deploying nuclear weapons from its continuously at sea fleet of four submarines. This meant "Britain is the only major nuclear power with only one platform from which to launch its nuclear arsenal. The US maintains a nuclear triad—able to launch from land, air and sea—while France, through its *force de dissuasion*, has both air and sea capability."

The *Times* stated, "Senior sources said the UK was looking at procuring Lockheed Martin's F-35A Lightning stealth fighter jet, which has recently been ordered by the German Luftwaffe, although other types of aircraft are thought to be under consideration."

Britain's nuclear fleet and Trident II missile system, with 225 warheads is entirely dependent on the US. The *Sunday Times* writes that the UK now wants to buy US F-35A's with "a range of 1,400km, longer than other variants of the F-35" that "can carry the B61 thermonuclear gravity bomb, the United States's primary air-dropped bomb from its stockpile of 3,708 nuclear weapons. It has a yield of between 0.3 and 340 kilotons—the first nuclear bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima... had 15 kilotons—and it expected the UK would carry these, rather than its own nuclear weapons, as part of Nato's nuclear-sharing arrangements."

Starmer has accepted all 62 SDR recommendations, including that the National Security Council of ministers review progress on the UK's nuclear deterrent at least twice a year.

He declared Monday, "The NATO alliance means something profound. That we will never fight alone." This was "the fundamental source of our strategic strength" and why our defence policy will always be "NATO first... So that when we are building new capabilities at home we are making our allies safer too."

This meant "strengthening Europe", but mainly "strengthening our bridge to the US as Britain's first partner in defence."

The presence of Dr. Fiona Hill on the SDR panel also makes clear the orientation to the US. The plan for an SDR was announced prior to Trump coming to power last November and Hill—currently Chancellor of the University of Durham in England—was chosen for her extensive ties to previous Republican and Democratic Party administrations.

Elected to the Harvard University Board of Overseers in 2023, Hill was an intelligence analyst under Republican President George W. Bush and the Democrats Barack Obama from 2006 to 2009. During Trump's first administration she served as deputy assistant to the president and senior director for European and Russian affairs on the National Security Council from 2017 to 2019.

For her willingness to confront Trump in pursuit of a more confrontational policy towards Moscow, she was described in a Politico profile as "The Russia Hawk in the White House" and in the *Guardian* as a "heroine for our times".

The head of the UK's armed forces, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, was asked Monday if Britain could defeat Russia in a war today. He replied that the UK was a nuclear power, a member of NATO, and had the backing of the US—the "most powerful nation on the planet".

With the Labour government already widely despised, funding war with Russia requires an upsurge in the austerity offensive against the working class not seen since the 1930s.

Commenting on Starmer's speech *Sky News* Political Editor Beth Rigby said, "The rhetoric couldn't be clearer: Britain is on a wartime footing." However, "To spend 3 percent of GDP on defence, the PM needs to find an extra £13 billion. That's difficult, especially when the government could U-turn on some welfare cuts."



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